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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000728

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION DENOUNCES CORRUPT ELECTORAL SYSTEM

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 727

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MARK M. BOULWARE FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: For opposition leaders Ahmed Ould Daddah and Mohamed Ould Maouloud, the outcome of the November 8 senatorial elections is the living proof that Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz intends to squash all dissenting voices through widespread electoral fraud and intimidation. According to them, Mauritania is headed towards a Taya-like monolithical state party system; however, they both agree that Taya was more generous in allowing some space for the opposition to express itself. For both Maouloud and Daddah, widespread fraud in Mauritania's electoral system poses a dangerous threat for democracy and democratic alternance. They called on the U.S. to use its influence to promote dialogue in the spirit of the Dakar Accords which it endorsed. End summary.

MAOULOD: AZIZ IS DESTROYING THE OPPOSITION

¶2. (C) On November 10, PolOff met with Union des Forces du Progres (UFP) President and influential opposition leader Mohamed Ould Maouloud to inquire about the causes behind the opposition's defeat. Maouloud said the opposition accepted to participate in these elections as a signal to the majority that they are willing to take part in the political process. They also viewed the senatorial elections as a test to gauge the government's interest in engaging in dialogue and giving the opposition some space for participation.

¶3. (C) The "testing the waters" strategy consisted in presenting joint FNDD/RFD lists for only those places where the opposition had a majority of municipal counselors and was sure to win: Nouakchott, Boutilimit, Barkeoles and Aleg. They did not field lists in any other electoral regions because they feared they would not have a fair chance in the electoral race and could not afford to waste resources and energy. In Nouakchott, for example, Maouloud said the FNDD/RFD felt confident they could win at least one seat thanks to the proportional system. Note: Taya instituted a proportional system in Nouakchott where there are three senatorial seats and 63 municipal council members. The purpose of this system was to ensure the opposition had at least one seat in Nouakchott. According to this system, as explained by Maouloud, a list gets a seat for every 21 council member votes. For example, if the majority gets 52 votes, and the minority 11, the majority gets two full seats

(21 21=42). The third seat is then given to whoever has the majority of the votes, which would be the minority's 11 votes against the majority's 10 remaining votes (52-42=10). End note. With 17 APP, UFP and RFD council members, the opposition thought they had a good chance at winning the traditional third seat. Nevertheless, some of its council members were allegedly "bought off" by the majority and voted against their own parties.

¶4. (C) Aziz, according to Maouloud, is seeking to reproduce Taya's monolithic state party system, which regroups the "strong man's" clientele in a single party and allows small, weak parties to exist to keep a semblance of democracy. The only difference between Taya and Aziz, said Maouloud, is that Taya made an effort to let the opposition have a minimum of voices whereas Aziz wants to entirely squash the opposition. "Even one single seat for the opposition is considered too much of a concession," said Maouloud. Considerable financial means and pressure were deployed by the majority to ensure the opposition was thoroughly defeated. Maouloud stressed that Aziz is managing the political system now in the same way he did before the coup d'etat -- excluding the opposition and curtailing its access to state-run media. The country is rapidly moving towards a dictatorship, stated Maouloud. The fight against corruption is a measure to remove those who no longer advance Aziz's agenda in order to replace them with new, more powerful "clients." It also serves as a retribution method for opposition members.

¶5. (C) Aziz has established widespread corruption in the electoral system with the help of rich and powerful Ouled

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Bisbaa tribesmen like Ould Ghadde, who has the monopoly of basic food imports, as well as Bouamatou. The Ouled Bisbaa business interests have the financial means to buy votes to ensure their permanence in power. Maouloud said that the Ouled Bisbaa are creating a monopoly by eliminating competing businesses. He claims, for example, that the Somagaz director was recently removed from his position because he refused to take measures that would bankrupt Somagaz, a parastatal, for the benefit of Bouamatou's new private gas company.

¶6. (C) Maouloud told PolOff that widespread corruption in the electoral system or what he calls "the mafioso electoral system" poses a danger to Mauritanian national security as drug cartels seeking to establish themselves in Mauritania can now buy votes to ensure politicians involved in drug-trafficking get elected. He asked the U.S. to open its eyes to the new reality of drugs and politics in Mauritania and the possibility of Mauritania becoming a narco-state down the line. According to Maouloud, there are already many government officials involved in trafficking networks. PolOff responded that the government had deployed efforts to apprehend cartel leaders such as Erick Walter M'Benga, who was extradited to Mauritania from Senegal. Maouloud challenged PolOff to research how many traffickers had been released or escaped from prison versus those tried and sentenced. He said he was highly skeptical M'Benga would be judged. "It is likely he will escape, or get killed, or be released; but he will never be judged," he stressed. "Drug trafficking cases brought to Mauritania come here to die."

¶7. (C) Maouloud pointed out that the Mercure hotel, property of SNIM, was recently sold to a Colombian who has hotels in Senegal and Guinea Bissau. Maouloud said this information is alarming as it points to the implantation of regional drug-traffickers in Mauritania. In Maouloud's view, Latin American business interests in Mauritania can only be motivated by drug-trafficking. Comment: The sale of the Mercure hotel to a Colombian businessman was published in the press and many contacts have brought PolOff's attention to the opaque nature of the sale and the true motivations behind it. According to Embassy contact and opposition leader Abdel Koudouss Abeidna, the buyer is a long-time associate of

M'Benga. PolOff has been unable to confirm this information.
End comment.

¶8. (C) Maouloud finished by calling on the U.S., as guarantor of the Dakar Agreement, to hold Aziz's government accountable for maintaining a healthy political dialogue in the interest of long-term stability. "Aziz has not lived up to his Dakar engagements," he said. His plans to disenfranchise the opposition and to manipulate the electoral system are the ultimate proof that he is not acting in good faith. "All we want is to ensure that there is a state of law and that democratic alternance is guaranteed," said Maouloud.

WORSE THAN TAYA

¶9. (C) On November 11, PolOff met with Rassemblement des Forces Democratiques (RFD) President Ahmed Ould Daddah, who stated that the senatorial elections had limited importance for his party as, with only six senators out of 56, the RFD was already under-represented in the senate. Note: The RFD lost one senator in this election and now only has five. End note. Daddah said these elections allowed him to understand that the regime is becoming increasingly totalitarian and intolerant of the opposition as it is seeking through electoral fraud to strip the opposition of its already limited voices. "Aziz does not want any voice to express itself other than his," intimated Daddah. "How can six senators compete with his 56?"

¶10. (C) Daddah said that electoral fraud in Mauritania has become increasingly widespread, systematic and sophisticated. He stated that in Boutilimit, his hometown, advisors who had been bribed to vote for Union Pour la Republique (UPR) candidates were provided with a code and asked to vote by

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writing that code on their ballot as proof that they had honored their engagement. Note: In Mauritania, any sign inside the voting square on the ballot is accepted. End note. The extent of electoral fraud, he said, has pushed his party to reconsider whether participation is better than boycott. According to Daddah, the situation now is worse than in 1992 under Taya as Taya allowed a space for the opposition whereas that space is getting increasingly smaller under Aziz. At the time, the RFD obtained 33 percent in the elections.

¶11. (C) Daddah agrees with Maouloud that the country is moving towards a state party system. When asked about his role as leader of the democratic opposition, a dejected Daddah responded he was thinking about stepping down. He declared himself disappointed at Assembly President (and former opposition party presidential candidate) Messaoud Ould Boulkheir's opening speech, which he thought was too positive. Comment: In his controversial speech at the opening of the Assembly's ordinary session, Boulkheir recognized Aziz's win and called for dialogue between the majority and the opposition. He also endorsed Aziz's fight against corruption. End comment. Daddah stated the RFD's position is less conciliatory as it refuses to recognize the results of the election and the legitimacy of the government. Nevertheless, in a seemingly contradictory position, Daddah said he would continue working with the FNDD as he thought the opposition needed to remain united.

¶12. (C) According to Daddah, the U.S.'s and Europe's approach to counter-terrorism is mistaken. He stated the Europeans and Americans had put the military in power because they thought it would help security. He declared "he does not feel that U.S. policy in Mauritania lives up to President Obama's democratic aspirations." Comment: Daddah, like many opposition leaders, holds a grudge against the U.S. for recognizing Aziz's win. Nevertheless, in his statements, he

seems to forget that he plotted with Aziz to block democratic institutions in Mauritania and precipitate the coup d'etat against Abdallahi and that it took him months to place himself on the side of those who unequivocally rejected the coup. End comment.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The blame game between the opposition and the majority continues. The majority is set on proving that the opposition is a small group of unreasonable individuals who intend to obstruct the political process. For the opposition, the majority is only interested in dialogue aimed at bringing dissenting voices under the fold. They think that Aziz's motto is "those who are not with me, are against me and will be eliminated." Boulkheir's decision to accept Aziz' win and engage in dialogue is a powerful gesture. The ball is now on the majority's court. End comment.
BOULWARE